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Frame The Agenda

A crucial part of the pre-negotiation phase is preparing to have the right players at the table, and a negotiating agenda. However, in some disputes, none of the parties express a willingness to negotiate. It can be especially difficult for a party with less power to get the more powerful party to the negotiation table. For example, a labor union's attempt to discuss pay increases with management may be perceived by management as a threat to the status quo, to be avoided. So how can the party with less bargaining power bring the high-power party to the table?

New research by Nour Kteily of Northwestern University and his colleagues found that either group can influence the other to enter negotiations by framing the order of the issues in the proposed negotiating agenda. In five studies which included real-world Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, the researchers learned that members of the low power group were more willing to negotiate when their high-power counterpart proposed to begin with the more consequential issues first. Low-power group members favored a "consequential first" agenda because it implied greater potential for changes to the status quo, which prompted their willingness to negotiate. This was true even in the conflicts marked by exceptionally high levels of mistrust, suspicion and crystallized negative attitudes.

In contrast, the low-power groups viewed a reverse issue order "consequential later" agenda proposed by the high-power party as a stall tactic that indicated an unwillingness to seriously discuss the important issues. Conversely, high-power group members preferred to receive "consequential later" agendas because they seemed to pose less threat to their position of advantage. They interpreted a "consequential first" agenda proposed by the low-power group as an aggressive bargaining tactic that signaled an unwillingness to compromise.

The negotiating agenda can specify which issues will be discussed and the manner in which the discussion will proceed. The research suggests that to bring a powerful group to the table, consider proposing an agenda that starts with minor issues first, leaving consequential issues until later. During the negotiations you can bring the more consequential issues into the discussion, if possible, as part of "logrolling" to find tradeoffs among the range of issues.